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# Italian Ways: On And Off The Rails From Milan To Palermo



## Synopsis

So inviting you might find yourself tempted to give the experience a whirl and ride the Italian trains yourself, book in hand. "Liesl Schillinger, New York Times Book Review Tim Parks's books on Italy have been hailed as "so vivid, so packed with delectable details, [they] serve as a more than decent substitute for the real thing" (Los Angeles Times Book Review). Now, in his first Italian travelogue in a decade, he delivers a charming and funny portrait of Italian ways by riding its trains from Verona to Milan, Rome to Palermo, and right down to the heel of Italy. Parks begins as any traveler might: "A train is a train is a train, isn't it?" But soon he turns his novelist's eye to the details, and as he journeys through majestic Milano Centrale station or on the newest high-speed rail line, he delivers a uniquely insightful portrait of Italy. Through memorable encounters with ordinary Italians—conductors and ticket collectors, priests and prostitutes, scholars and lovers, gypsies and immigrants—Parks captures what makes Italian life distinctive: an obsession with speed but an acceptance of slower, older ways; a blind eye toward brutal architecture amid grand monuments; and an undying love of a good argument and the perfect cappuccino. Italian Ways also explores how trains helped build Italy and how their development reflects Italians' sense of themselves from Garibaldi to Mussolini to Berlusconi and beyond. Most of all, Italian Ways is an entertaining attempt to capture the essence of modern Italy. As Parks writes, "To see the country by train is to consider the crux of the essential Italian dilemma: Is Italy part of the modern world, or not?" 4 maps

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Tim Parks, an English expatriate living in Italy since 1981, offers a book that attempts to explain aspects of contemporary Italian life through the country's train system. He discusses his purpose to some Sicilians he dines with by saying, "I'm of the opinion that a culture... manifests itself entirely in anything the people of that culture do." Given the fact that he takes the train to work everyday, Parks decides to write about how Italian culture manifests itself through the train system. The book is very well written and proved to be a quick read -- aside from some slow-moving meditations on timetables, station announcements, etc. (a lot of which might fall completely flat on a reader who has not been in Italy, or not frequently, since much of what he observes has changed over the past ten years). As other reviewers have remarked, the first half, largely comprised on observations made in Parks's home base in Verona/Northern Italy, is more complex and engaging, while the second half of the book, especially the sections regarding the south of Italy are a bit shoddier and feel almost forced. Some of the earlier chapters could stand on their own as self-contained essays, and I'd recommend them without hesitation. They are insightful and humorous. The book's unevenness aside, there are larger problems. First, at its core, the book is an investigation of "national character," akin to what numerous Anglophone writers (primarily English, but also Americans) have done over the centuries with Italy (and other "exotic" lands) and even what an Italian, Luigi Barzini did as well back in the 1960s. For me, it's a dated endeavor, and I can't help but think of what my reaction would've been if Mr.

As a second-generation Italian-American, when I first visited the former homeland of my immigrant grandparents' in *ciociaria*, I felt a stir, like I had come home. That is the same feeling I had reading Tim Parks' *Italian Ways*. The book was recommended by "The Smiling Eggplant." It did not disappoint. I could identify with so many of Parks' observations on the Italian psyche - and his experiences with the ticket vending and validation machines. At times, I laughed out loud. I couldn't help myself. When I tried to read some passages aloud to my son, I would start laughing so hard the words I tried to repeat became unintelligible. This is not a book about trains, although there is a great deal of interesting and, perhaps, useful information about Italian railway nuances included. It is a book about many universal themes, including variations on the sense of smell. That, of course, is what makes it art. It is by no means an anti-Italian or mean-spirited book in any way. Yes, he draws fun from stereotypical behaviors, but shows us the soul of Italy - its people. Everyone can criticize their government - any government. Parks points out so many instances where the Italian governments, the railway system, bureaucracies and bureaucrats of all types give folks plenty to criticize and bemoan. But, he shows us a railway that can homogenize a still very parochial people -

all with the same kinds of passion, loyalties, hopes, frustrations, disappointments, and their matchless Italian ability to accommodate and rise above those systemic irritants. His railway brings a realization that things do not need to be the way they are - they just are, for now. Parks is a likeable and readable passenger with a wonderfully twisted eye for detail.

I was expecting this book to be an insightful and possibly humorous look into Italy and its people using the train system as a metaphor or manifestation of the culture. Instead the book is what you might expect to hear in a very boring dinner conversation from a malcontent that is unable to see the good for the bad and just whines incessantly about everything that is wrong. My impressions of Italy spending far less time there than the author is one of complexity much in common with my Indian experiences, especially the Government bureaucracy and the attitudes towards efficiency or lack thereof. But within that complexity there is much to enjoy, learn and love in Latin cultures which many Anglo Saxons never seem to get. This author is an example of the latter despite being married to an Italian and having lived there for decades. It is the author's right to choose what to portray but this book is much more about how Italy doesn't conform to what he wants and to his ego than his experiences in discovering Italy, the good, the bad and the ugly and how they are intertwined. The book might have been saved by either being humorous or being insightful but is neither. The style grates after a while as incessant whining where only the bad things happen. His reading of the culture is also wrong. For example, he finds inconsistency in what the country is trying to do to modernize and what it really is and attributes it to a national character that is beyond hypocrisy and has learned to live with that inconsistency without even thinking about it. This is a wrong reading of reality because it is not the same people wanting to modernize and yet the same time content with old mores and habits.

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